

Gradual Experiences of Sudden Enlightenment:
The Varieties of Ganhwa Seon Teachings in Contemporary Korea

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Introduction

Western Buddhists, who were introduced to Korean Seon (Jp. Zen, Ch. Chan 禪) Buddhism through Seung Sahn sunim (1927-2004), might find it surprising that gong'an (Jp. kōan 公案) meditation practice is taught quite differently in Korea from the way Seung Sahn sunim trained his disciples in the West. For instance, Seon masters in Korea generally do not ask their student to resolve a series of different gong'an gates like the way Seung Sahn sunim did. Instead, meditating on a single gong'an is considered sufficient in itself to bring the student to full awakening. It is also not a common practice to allot one-on-one private interview (Jp. *dokusan* 独参) time with a Seon master as part of the daily training schedule in a Korean monastery; although students can certainly meet with their teacher after having a breakthrough experience or when facing a difficult internal obstacle outside the regular monastic schedule. For native Korean Buddhists, it has been an open secret that Seung Sahn sunim heavily adopted the Japanese Rinzai Zen style in his teaching of gong'an practice, which was familiar to his Western disciples, but foreign to most Korean Buddhists. In this paper, I would like to introduce the other side, the teachings of gong'an practices by contemporary Korean Seon masters in Korea, which would be familiar to Korean Buddhists, but probably new to many Western readers.

I choose to focus on the teachings of three masters—Songdam sunim (b. 1929), Seongcheol sunim (1912-1993) and Subul sunim (b. 1953)—not only for their eminence

and scope of influence among contemporary Korean Buddhists, but also for their range of different interpretations and approaches to the gong'an practice. Various English verbs have been used to describe the act of "investigating into," "ruminating upon," or "concentrating on" the critical phrase of a gong'an, called hwadu (Ch. huatou, Jp. wato 話頭)¹. I am particularly interested in examining the precise meaning of the act of "meditating on" a hwadu according to these Korean masters. In addition, in spite of the ruling orthodoxy of "sudden enlightenment" in the Korean Seon tradition, which disparages any attempt to present the path to enlightenment in a gradual way, Korean masters, nevertheless, have expounded different stages that most practitioners experience prior to sudden awakening. I will discuss their descriptions of the pre-enlightenment experience while arguing that a student's awakening is often tested by their Seon master, not based on what happened after enlightenment, but rather based on the experience leading up to enlightenment. Lastly, I will visit the contemporary discussion of gong'an practice in the West and discuss the pitfalls of imagining a uniformity of gong'an practices largely based on the Japanese Rinzai Zen model.

The Teachings of Songdam Sunim

Songdam 松潭 sunim is one of the most revered living Seon masters in Korea. He was born in 1929 near the city of Gwangju in southwest part of Korean peninsula. He was ordained as a novice monk in 1945 and received the full bhikṣu precepts in 1951. He is well known among Korean Buddhists for taking the vow of silence over ten years prior to his awakening. In 1957, Songdam sunim received *in'ga*, recognition of his

¹ For more detail discussion on hwadu, see Robert Buswell Jr. *The Zen Monastic Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 150-153.

enlightenment from his teacher Jeon'gang sunim (1898-1975) and joined his teacher's Dharma lineage which includes such renowned masters as Kyeongheo sunim (1849-1912) and Mangong sunim (1871-1946). Since the parinirvāṇa of his teacher in 1975, Songdam sunim has supervised the spiritual training of monastic residents and lay practitioners in Yonghwa Seonwon, in the city of Incheon, where his teacher also taught.

According to Songdam sunim, meditation practice on a hwadu begins and ends with having doubt. Without it, one is merely meditating on “dead words” (Kr. *sagu* 死句) as opposed to “living words” (Kr. *hwalgu* 活句). He says that “the life of a hwadu relies on doubt,” and thus meditating on a hwadu means “keenly observing doubt in regards to the hwadu” until “the doubt becomes so earnest and deep that it overflows one's heart and fills the entire universe.”² In other words, the whole point of meditating on the hwadu is generating doubt from the gong'an's question and gradually expanding it to the absolute maximum point by intense observation of the doubt. This approach is quite different from that of kōan practice in the Japanese Rinzai Zen tradition, where students are taught to “become one with” (Jp. *narikiru*) the critical phrase itself, or to come up with the “right” answer for the private interview.³ Although they are closely related, it is important to remember that the doubt is categorically distinct from the critical phrase. What practitioners should ultimately observe, according to Songdam sunim, is not the critical phrase itself, but the doubt aroused by the critical phrase. Even though this distinction is subtle, the difference is paramount since it determines whether one is meditating on “dead words” or on “living words.”

² See Songdam, “Hwalgu Chamseonbeop,” *Bulil hoebo*, July, 1988.

³ See G. Victor Sōgen Hori, “Kōan and Kenshō in the Rinzai Zen Curriculum,” in *The Kōan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 288-289.

In regards to the actual meditation technique of the hwadu practice, Songdam sunim teaches his students to coordinate it with their breathing. As the preparatory exercise before the actual hwadu practice, Songdam sunim first instructs his student to master the technique of breathing through the lower abdomen area (Kr. *danjeon* 丹田), and to practice the meditation of counting breath (Kr. *susikgwan* 數息觀). Once the student is able to do these practices well, he then assigns his student to work on the hwadu of “what is it?” (Kr. *yi-mwo-kko*, Ch. *shi shen-ma* 是甚麼) which traces its origin to the meeting of the sixth patriarch Huineng 六祖慧能 (638-713) and Nanyue Huairang 南嶽懷讓 (677-744), and also happens to be one of the most popular hwadus in Korea.⁴

Songdam sunim says:

After breathing in deeply and holding your breath for about three seconds, you ask, “what is it?” as you are breathing out. While breathing in again, you maintain the lingering resonance of your previous “what is it?” and observe it quietly. You hold your breath for about three seconds [again] and, while breathing out, do another “what is it?” As you keep doing “what is it?” along with your breathing, you will be less and less distracted. When you are able to do “what is it?” well [without distraction], you just need to do it every other breath. Once you have become accustomed to it, then bring up the hwadu once every five breaths while keeping the doubt continuously. When you become even better at it, there will come a day when you just need to do “what is it?” only once as you open your eyes in the morning and live your whole day [with the doubt]. Once you reach this stage, it will be impossible not to be awakened. You will live your regular daily life along with the unknowable single hwadu. While working on the hwadu, you will be able to eat, shit, walk, ride a car and have a conversation with others. This is the way you are supposed to do.⁵

This method of coordinating the hwadu meditation practice with breathing has been known in contemporary Korea as a signature instruction of Songdam sunim.

However, the origin of its technique can be traced to his teacher, Jeon’gang sunim. It is

⁴ See Buswell, *The Zen Monastic Experience*, p.155.

⁵ See Songdam, “Hwalgu Chamseonbeop,” *Bulil hoebo*, July, 1988.

meant to prevent not only mental distraction from random thoughts, but also a common “Zen sickness” (Kr. seonbyeong, Ch. chanbing, Jp. zenbyō 禪病) called *sangki* 上氣, which has the symptom of an abnormal rising of *ki* (Ch. qi, Jp. ki 氣) energy toward one’s upper body and head.⁶ As we will see even more clearly in the teaching of Subul sunim later, meditation on a hwadu is an inherently somatic practice in addition to being mental exercise.

It is important to note that Songdam sunim does not see the need to recite the given hwadu over and over again when the practitioner is no longer distracted and can maintain the doubt continuously. This implies that the hwadu is never meant to be recited like a mantra. If one merely repeats the critical phrase like a mantra as though its meaning is irrelevant, and its potency resides in the sound, it is a sure sign of meditating on “dead words.” Moreover, this also reveals the expedient nature of the hwadu; once doubt is aroused, it is unnecessary to constantly recall or hang onto the hwadu itself.

Songdam sunim further expounds what happens after accomplishing the state of keeping the doubt continuously even in the midst of mundane daily activities. The next stage is where the practitioner can meditate on the hwadu automatically even if s/he does not intentionally try to do so. He says:

Once you get to that stage, even if you do not intend to raise the hwadu consciously, it is raised automatically. While eating, the hwadu is raised. While shitting, the hwadu is raised. While riding a car, the hwadu is raised...Even when you are dreaming, the hwadu is raised. After passing six or seven days in this state, all of a sudden, you will attain the great enlightenment of broad penetration (Kr. hwakcheol dae-o 廓徹大悟). It is like breaking a large water pot with a large stone. As you hit the pot with a stone, the pot breaks all of sudden, and water gushes out. In a similar

⁶ Ibid.

fashion, you would penetrate the hwadu and awaken to your true self, Buddhist truth and the truth of the universe.⁷

If the practitioner can continuously meditate on the hwadu without having to make conscious effort, this clearly is a positive sign indicating that one is advancing well toward one's great enlightenment. Being able to work on the hwadu even in the state of dreaming is another positive indicator. From that moment on, it is just a matter of six or seven days before the practitioner's full awakening. Although Songdam sunim does not explicitly present this as a gradual process or step-by-step stages to follow, this pre-enlightenment experience is at least common enough to merit generalization and share it with his monastic and lay disciples. Interestingly, Songdam sunim ends by upholding the orthodoxy of "sudden enlightenment" with the remark that, much like breaking of a water pot, the moment of awakening is sudden and instantaneous.

The Teachings of Seongcheol Sunim

Seongcheol 性徹 sunim is, without a doubt, one of the most influential and prominent Seon masters in the history of modern Korean Buddhism. Even when he was alive, he was widely revered as a living Buddha for his extremely ascetic lifestyle and rigorous training of monastics. He was born in 1912 and became ordained at the age of 24 under the guidance of Dongsan 東山 sunim. Four years after his ordination, it is known that Seongcheol sunim had his awakening experience during the summer retreat in Donghwa-sa. Afterward, he underwent an eight-year long practice of *jangjwa burwa* 長坐不臥, which entailed sitting in the meditation position without lying down regardless of day or night. In 1967, he assumed the role of the first patriarch (Kr. Bangjang 方丈) of

⁷ Ibid.

the Haein-sa Monastic Compound and, then in 1981, he was honored with the position of the Patriarch (Kr. Jongjeong 宗正) of the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism. Until his parinirvāṇa in 1993, he met with countless monastic and lay visitors and taught them privately and publically while never leaving Haein-sa.

Seongcheol sunim was a strong advocate of meditating on a hwadu. He famously asserted that “the hwadu practice is the quickest way to arrive at the full enlightenment.”⁸ He spent a great deal of time teaching students how to properly meditate on a hwadu and what to avoid along the path. In contrast to the teaching of Songdam sunim, Seongcheol sunim taught that the key to the successful arousal of doubt lay not in the manner in which one repeats one’s hwadu, such as coordination with breathing, but in the very content of what one recites. That is to say that depending on the hwadu’s phrase, it can lead to successful arousal of doubt, or the lack thereof. For instance, repeating the popular hwadu, “what is it?” alone can potentially lead down a wrong path with no hope of generating doubt. He says:

When raising the hwadu of “what is it?” many people end up calmly observing their mind while repeating “what is it? what is it?” like that. By doing this repeatedly, the student rests his/her mind comfortably and falls into the pitfall of quietude. Consequently, the hwadu of “what is it?” becomes the object of sense sphere (Kr. kyeonggye 境界) and ends up producing the sickness of “what is that I am observing [in my mind] right now?” In another case, a student may ask “what is it that I am seeing and hearing?” This produces the sickness of distracting the mind by following outside sense objects of what s/he sees and hears. Therefore, in order to prevent those sicknesses, the patriarch in the past taught practitioners to ask, “what is it that it is neither mind, buddha, nor a material thing?” Only by asking this way, one won’t search “it” within their mind or follow the outside sense sphere.⁹

⁸ Wontaek, *Seongcheol sunim hwadu chamseonbeop* (Seoul: Kimyoungsa, 2008), p. 286.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

In Seongcheol sunim’s view, the hwadu is never a meaningless arbitrary phrase that one just uses to concentrate on. Instead, the hwadu is full of meanings that can either provoke doubt with the right set of phrases, or lead practitioners to a wrong path if the hwadu does not have the sufficient and correct set of words. Therefore, as for the “what is it?” hwadu is concerned, the additional phrase, “it is neither mind, buddha or a material thing” is indispensable because it can save many months and years of misguided effort on a meditation cushion futilely paying attention to various inward sensory phenomenon emerging from the state of quietude, or endlessly following outside sensory experience. To use an analogy, not providing the additional phrase would have been equivalent to giving directions to a stranger without adding a few critical warnings about ways to avoid dangerous pitfalls along the path.

If a practitioner is still looking inwardly for an observable “it” in spite of the warning that “it” is not mind, s/he may fall into the temptation of settling in quietude, or *samādhi* state, which lacks vivid alertness (Kr. seongseong 惺惺) required for the generation of doubt. This point is further elaborated in Seongcheol sunim’s commentary on the famous hwadu of *mu* 無 (Ch. *wu*, Jp. *mu*) from the case of Zhaozhou 趙州(778–897)’s dog. He says:

If practitioners sit and just do “*mu*” or “doesn’t-have,” they may be able to drop off delusional thoughts and fall into *samādhi* (Kr. jeong 定). They then mistakenly regard losing track of time in meditation as a good sign of cultivation. When I furtively ask those people about the level of their realization, [I find that] they do not know much. [This shows that] they have gone astray from the right path while they have not attained awakening. Therefore, when meditating on the hwadu, I tell them to always attach “why.” Only when you ask, “why *mu*?” will *samādhi* not manifest...The patriarchs in the past did not teach to just do “*mu*.” They insisted that one must ask, “why did master Zhaozhou say *mu*?”¹⁰

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 107.

Successful arousal of doubt would produce not only the state of calmness, but also the mental quality of alertness which can ultimately lead to the liberating wisdom. However, with the practice of “*mu*,” there is the inherent danger of falling into *samādhi* since its literal meaning, “non-existence” or “doesn’t-have” can facilitate emptying out of delusional thoughts as one repeats the phrase. More importantly, because the critical phrase is not in the form of a question, it won’t produce the psychological state of wondering and probing. Without this quality, the mind can comfortably settle down and enter into *samādhi*, which Seongcheol sunim labeled as one of the three major hindrances in Ganhwa Seon practice.¹¹ Therefore, adding the interrogative word “why” is absolutely necessary for preventing erroneous digression from the path.

Interestingly, Seongcheol sunim’s instruction of adding additional phrases to the hwadu exposes how the categorical distinction between a hwadu and its gong’an may be thin and malleable. Although technically, only “*mu*” is considered the “punch line” or the hwadu of Zhouzhou’s gong’an, in practice students may, in this case should, extend it to a full sentence beyond the traditionally designated critical phrase. As one, following the advice of “the past patriarchs,” meditates on “why did master Zhaozhou say *mu*?”, it becomes clear that the entire context of Zhaozhou’s gong’an matters. In other words, although they are categorically separated, in reality the hwadu cannot be examined independent of its gong’an.

As the Patriarch of the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, Seongcheol sunim was visited by many monastic and lay practitioners who wanted to ask him about their own

¹¹ Besides falling into *samādhi*, the other two major hindrances in Ganhwa Seon practice are 1) mistakenly thinking that you are already awakened when you are not, and 2) attachment to body and putting a lot of effort to breathing exercise. See *ibid.*, pp. 99-109.

meditation experience. Sometimes, a practitioner came to inquire whether his/her “enlightenment” experience was genuine and final. For that, Seongcheol sunim typically asked three questions to examine the level of the questioner’s enlightenment, which are known as “the three barriers” (Kr. samgwan 三關) or “the three stages of cultivation” (Kr. sandan suhaeng 三段修行).¹² However, these “barriers” are not additional gong’an questions like the “checking questions” in the Japanese Rinzai tradition.¹³ Rather, they are only meant to find out whether the practitioner went through the three particular stages of experiences prior to their breakthrough. “The three stages” share some of the features with the pre-enlightenment experience described by Songdam sunim, although Seongcheol sunim’s version is much more detail and systematized.

The first question that Seongcheol sunim would ask is whether a practitioner can meditate on his/her hwadu constantly regardless of moving or staying still (Kr. dongjeong yilyeo 動靜一如). The key word here is “constantly”. According to Seongcheol sunim, the intensity and depth of engagement with the hwadu should not fluctuate just because one is carrying out mundane activities instead of sitting on a meditation cushion. If the practitioner replied that s/he was able to achieve the first stage of steadfastness, then Seongcheol sunim would ask the second question: were you able to meditate on the hwadu constantly even when you were dreaming (Kr. mongjung yilyeo 夢中一如)? Here the question concerns whether or not there was any difference between waking state and dreaming state. If the practitioner was no longer meditating on the hwadu and lost in dreaming, then the “enlightenment” experience was neither genuine nor final. However,

¹² See *ibid.*, pp.78-87.

¹³ For the discussion of checking questions in the Japanese Rinzai tradition, see Victor Sōgen Hori, *Zen Sand: the Book of Capping Phrases for Kōan Practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2003), pp. 16-27.

if the answer was yes to the second question, then Seongcheol sunim would follow up with the final question: were you able to meditate on the hwadu constantly even in the dreamless state (Kr. sukmyeon yilyeo 熟眠一如)? If the hwadu disappeared as one entered the dreamless state of sleeping from dream state, then the practitioner's "enlightenment" experience is again not final, and s/he still has a lot more to go before reaching "the great enlightenment of broad penetration" (Kr. hwakcheol dae-o 廓徹大悟).

He says:

Even if [you] pour down, like water from a bottle, boastful words of transcending the Buddha and the patriarch based on knowledge that has not even reached the [second] stage of *mongjung yilyeo*, [you will see] their complete worthlessness as they melt away like ice or break apart like a roofing tile when facing ferociously manifesting arrays of sufferings during the period of [real] cultivation...If you conceit other sentient beings with the malicious "wisdom" that is not even in the level of *mongjung yilyeo* while coveting this worldly fame and wealth, it is none other than the great māra misguiding both you and others and stealing the whole seed of Buddhahood. [Therefore,] the patriarchs reprimanded [a person like you] with all the strength they had in the past.¹⁴

Seongcheol sunim's "three stages of cultivation" presents a curious tension if it is juxtaposed with his famous teaching of "sudden enlightenment and sudden cultivation" (Kr. don-o donsū 頓悟頓修), which claims that after the enlightenment, there is nothing more to cultivate. Even though he remains firm that no gradual cultivation is necessary after the complete enlightenment, he, on the other hand, considers the path to the complete enlightenment as a gradual three-stage process while denying anything less than that to be the genuine enlightenment experience. Intriguingly, his measure of someone's enlightenment was based not on the ability to "solve" the gong'an's question with the "correct" answer, but on the stability of one's meditation on the gong'an under

¹⁴ See Wontaek, *Seongcheol sunim hwadu chamseonbeop*, pp. 191-192.

increasingly subtler states of consciousness before the enlightenment experience. This probably has to do with the fact that the gong'an, at least in the Korean tradition, is not regarded like a riddle that needs to be solved or answered correctly. This is probably the reason why frequent one-on-one interviews with the abbot have not become part of the monastic training schedule. If we were to compare it with the Kōan practice in the Japanese Rinzai tradition, this indeed reveals an interesting dichotomy which I will discuss in the conclusion section.

The Teachings of Subul Sunim

Subul 修弗 sunim is a respected Seon master in contemporary Korea who has successfully popularized gong'an and hwadu practices among lay Buddhists. He became a novice monk in his early 20s at Beomeo-sa 梵魚寺 and took the full bhikṣu precepts in 1977 under the precept master Go-u 古愚 sunim. After the graduation from Beomeo-sa Monastic College (Kr. gangwon 講院) in 1978, he devoted himself fully to meditation practice and had his awakening experience in 1981 while conversing with the patriarch master (Kr. Josil 祖室) of Beomeo-sa, Jiyu 知有 sunim. He was given the new name, "Subul" from the patriarch, implying that he has "nothing further to cultivate." From 1989, he started to teach gong'an and hwadu practices to lay followers. His meditation center, Ahnkook Seonwon 安國禪院 grew quickly since its opening in Busan and he inaugurated a new center in Seoul in 1996. Approximately 3000 lay practitioners regularly attend his centers, and his approach to gong'an and hwadu practices is becoming increasingly influential.

The most striking aspect of Subul sunim's teaching is his method of triggering doubt in the mind of a practitioner. He agrees with Songdam sunim and Seongcheol sunim that, if a student is merely meditating on a hwadu without doubt, s/he is concentrating on "dead words" which will lead to nowhere. On the other hand, when it comes to the method of actually generating doubt, Subul sunim has a rather different approach. He believes that the reason why many practitioners fail to arouse doubt regarding the given hwadu is that "they only recite the gong'an's question without looking for its answer."¹⁵

This simple but significant realization came to him after one and half years of teaching to lay Buddhists between the year 1989 and 1990. In spite of his best effort, he noticed that a large proportion of lay practitioners who first joined the retreat at his center would not return. He spent the next one hundred days trying to figure out what he had done incorrectly. After the period of self-retrospection, he came to understand that his lay practitioners were having a hard time meditating because they were not "hooked" to the gong'an properly through doubt. After further examination, he discovered that he should have "asked them to find the gong'an's answer without letting them internally repeat the gong'an's question."¹⁶ According to Subul sunim, if a practitioner tries to forcefully "squeeze" doubt out of repeating the hwadu, this does not work very well, and consequently the whole process becomes very painful for most practitioners. In contrast, when the practitioner stops reciting the hwadu and dedicates his/her whole effort in finding only the answer, doubt arises much more quickly and easily. This is a considerable departure from the earlier two masters who assumed a more or less causal

¹⁵ Subul and Misan, "Ahnkook Seonwon Suhaeng Program," *Clear Mind*, September, 2008.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

relationship between recitation of the hwadu and arousal of the doubt. To Subul sunim, it is irrelevant how or what one recites. Once the practitioner has understood the gong'an's context and its question, s/he should let go of the question completely and look for only the answer.

There is another aspect of his teaching that is markedly different from that of Songdam sunim. Subul sunim does not see the need to allocate time to first calm his student's mind and reduce mental distraction of random thoughts. Instead, he teaches that one should meditate on the hwadu along with delusional thoughts. Once doubt is aroused, mental distraction will naturally cease. If one is to initially spend days and nights trying to get rid of delusional thoughts separate from the actual hwadu practice, it won't be as productive and may take long time before accomplishing its goal. Moreover, as his students are instructed to stop repeating the gong'an's question, this pushes them to disassociate from linguistic and conceptual side of mental functioning and thereby effectively silences their mind. Meanwhile, it still retains the mental condition of intense probing, which resembles, like Robert Buswell has suggested, the "mental quandary one experiences when trying to think of a word one knows but cannot quite call to mind."¹⁷ This teaching is radically different from that of Songdam sunim who encourages his students to calm their mind first through the counting of breath before meditating on the hwadu.

One of Subul sunim's famous teachings is that "the hwadu practice must be cultivated and experienced through one's whole body."¹⁸ His description of the pre-enlightenment meditation experience has a great emphasis on the bodily dimension. He

¹⁷ See Robert Buswell, *The Zen Monastic Experience*, p.157.

¹⁸ Cheol-u Kim, "Onmom-uiro Chaedeuk doeneun Seon-ui Kkaedaleum-e Nuntteura," *Hyeondae Bulkyo*, March 15, 2005.

teaches that when the doubt manifests, it is usually mixed with certain physiological sensations. He says:

When a thought of wanting to know the answer arises, your mind will be caught in the feeling of uneasiness. Some sort of stifling sensation begins to slowly creep inside your mind. Why did that kind of feeling emerge? It is because [you are] like a person with parched throat desperately looking for water. When water does not appear, the person becomes even thirstier. Because you feel uneasy and stifled, you try to find the answer [to get over that feeling]. But as the answer cannot be found, you have no choice but to keep on probing to the end.¹⁹

According to Subul sunim, the doubt is not a mere intellectual state of unknowing but also involves bodily sensations of uneasiness, irritation and even suffocation.

Manifestation of these “sensations of doubt” (Kr. *yijeong* 疑情) is critical because it is the engine behind the hwadu practice. In an attempt to escape from uneasy and stifling sensation of unknowing, it drives the student to dig deeper and desperately search for the answer “as though his/her hair is on fire.”²⁰ However, the student should neither be afraid of this new sensation nor should s/he draw back and stop in this stage. He stresses the vital importance of looking for the gong’an’s answer all the way to the end even if the sensation of doubt is so intense that the student feels as though s/he is about to die. He says:

When the doubt is aroused properly, you should continue to advance to the point of experiencing a choking sensation in your throat and the feeling of imminent death. [In that stage,] you may experience formidable force from all four directions as though you are being locked inside a prison. You cannot find the way out but have to find the answer. [Consequently,] you cannot sit, stand, go away or come back. Nevertheless, you still have to move forward. This is the state of being completely engulfed by the doubt.²¹

¹⁹ Subul and Misan, “Ahnkook Seonwon Suhaeng Program,” *Clear Mind*, September, 2008.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Cheol-u Kim, “Onmom-uiro Chaedeuk doeneun Seon-ui Kkaedaleum-e Nuntteura,” *Hyeondae Bulkyo*, March 15, 2005.

As the student continues to look for the answer, the sensation of doubt is intensified to the point of losing control of his/her body. The student feels as though the body is locked inside a cage or prison, while the throat is choked, making it impossible to speak. Subul sunim interprets these phenomena as, based on the expressions from the Yuan 元 dynasty (1271-1368) Chan text, *Chanyao* 禪要, “encountering the silver mountain and iron wall (Kr. eusan cheolpyeok 銀山鐵壁)” and “swallowing the thorny chestnut burr (Kr. yulgeukbong 栗棘蓬).”²² This is also the stage where the sensation of doubt has transformed into the ball of doubt (Kr. yidan 疑團). Subul sunim explains that in this stage, even if the student wants to move or speak, s/he cannot easily do that. The whole body has become solidified like a hard wall, and therefore the student feels as though s/he has been imprisoned inside. Depending on the student, this period can last as briefly as an hour or as long as several days.

As the student reaches the point where s/he can no longer endure, suddenly “the silver mountain and iron wall” breaks down and collapses. This is the moment of awakening. Not surprisingly, the awakening experience includes both physical and mental dimensions. Subul sunim says that “the body feels lighter than a feather, and the mind is completely empty as though there is no beginning and ending. There is [nothing but] cool and refreshing [sensation].”²³ In another essay, he says “who can possibly know the feeling of flying in the sky? If you have experienced it, you will recognize it immediately.”²⁴

²² *Gaofeng Yuanmiao Chanshi Chanyao* 高峰原妙禪師禪要, Gaofeng 高峰 (1238-1295), Z. no. 1401, 70: 707c, 750a.

²³ Subul, *Hwanggeumbit Bonghwang-i* (Seoul: Yeosi-a-mun, 2005), p. 301.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

When a student expresses that s/he has experienced the breaking of the ball of doubt during the retreat, Subul sunim would immediately meet with the student and examine the experience. Similar to Seongcheol sunim's approach, Subul sunim's questions also concern not so much whether one has found the right answer to the gong'an, but rather the nature of the student's pre-enlightenment experience prior to the breakthrough.

Conclusion

According to the Yuan Dynasty text, *Chanyao* 禪要, the thirteenth century Chinese Chan master, Gaofeng Yuanmiao 高峰原妙 (1238-1295) had his awakening experience only after changing his gong'an. After penetrating his new gong'an, the master Gaofeng went back and reexamined what he had done incorrectly while meditating on his original gong'an of Zhaozhou's dog for three years. He realized that there was no unusual reason for having such a hard time with his earlier gong'an other than the fact that he lacked the sensation of doubt (Ch. *yiqing* 疑情) when meditating.²⁵ After switching his gong'an, the sensation of doubt manifested almost instantly, and thereby his meditation progressed quickly to awakening.

For many Korean monastics, who have studied *Chanyao* as part of their monastic curriculum, their foremost pressing concern in meditation hall has been whether they can generate, like the master Gaofeng did, the sensation of doubt in regards to their gong'an. This is their most immediate and important goal when sitting everyday on meditation cushion. All three contemporary Korean masters, despite notable differences in their teachings, do agree on this fundamental point and expound the critical role of doubt along

²⁵ *Gaofeng Yuanmiao Chanshi Chanyao* 高峰原妙禪師禪要, Gaofeng 高峰 (1238-1295), Z. no. 1401, 70: 703b.

the path of awakening. Like they said, without doubt, one is merely meditating on “dead words” and cannot advance in one’s practice.

However, when the gong’an tradition is discussed in the West, it is surprisingly rare to find an extensive discussion of doubt in gong’an practice. The case in point is a book published by Oxford University in 2000 titled *The Kōan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*.²⁶ Not a single essay in this book examines anything remotely related to the role of doubt in gong’an practice. In addition, other than the usual absence of any discussion of Korean Buddhism, the volume also ignored the post-Song Dynasty Chinese gong’an tradition all together. This certainly is not unique to this book, and we can find a similar tendency in other works preferring discourse on the nonduality of subject and object over discourse on the generation of doubt and Tang/Song Dynasty Chan Buddhism over Yuan Dynasty Buddhism. This, of course, stems from the fact that most gong’an studies in the West have been indebted to and initially framed by Japanese scholarship whose interest in Chan Buddhism after the Song Dynasty tends to dwindle precipitously. However, if the western scholarship truly wishes to move beyond Japanese sectarian scholarship and the particular brand of new Buddhism proselytized by early modern Japanese Zen teachers like D.T. Suzuki, then we must pay attention to the traditions that have been sidelined by them. In my opinion, without understanding Korean Seon and Chinese Yuan Dynasty Chan Buddhism, our picture of the gong’an tradition in East Asia will always remain partial, and the spell of D.T. Suzuki will never be completely broken.

Finally, much ink has been spilled in Korea over the issue of whether or not one still needs to cultivate after “sudden enlightenment” (Kr. don-o donsū 頓悟頓修 versus

²⁶ See Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright, eds., *The Kōan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

don-o jeomsu 頓悟漸修). This debate usually takes for granted that enlightenment comes suddenly, and the issue at stake concerns what happens after the awakening experience. However, to examine what comes before sudden enlightenment, what the contemporary Seon masters have taught is not an instant intuitive jump to transcendental wisdom but a step-by-step gradual process of maturation that requires both cognitive and somatic transformation. Due to the fear of being labeled as a gradualist, this important aspect of cultivation has been relatively de-emphasized compared to the main debate of sudden cultivation versus gradual cultivation after “sudden enlightenment.” But, for most gong’an practitioners who have not yet tasted enlightenment, I believe that what comes before sudden enlightenment matters significantly more than what happens after.

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